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ABSTRACT

A consortium program of eight private colleges in Southern California that focuses on student retention efforts is described. Each college has a retention task force consisting of faculty, administrators, student affairs staff, and students. A steering committee with one representative from each college, generally the dean of students, coordinates consortium activities. The consortium activities focus on four areas: data collection, organizational development, program development, and networking. The colleges are currently collecting data concerning the financial consequences of attrition, the characteristics of dropouts, and their reasons for leaving. One major source of student data is the Cooperative Institutional Research Program findings, which help to monitor local changes in the goals, interests, and experiences of entering students and which can be used for assessing the past and planning for the future. The consortium colleges also are planning special surveys of current and former students as part of their effort to assess the causes and consequences of attrition. The willingness of both institutions and individuals to use information to improve student retention is important. Efforts are being undertaken to help faculty and departments learn how to make improvements based on the student retention data. Another goal is to use the student data to develop a comprehensive set of interventions to attack the attrition problems, and to make adjustments once the interventions are operative, based on both national and campus-based research. The consortium provides a structure for contact and sharing of ideas and program results. The participating colleges are: Azusa Pacific College, Chapman College, Harvey Mudd College, Loyola Marymount University, Mount St. Mary's College, Pitzer College, Scripps College, and Whittier College. (SW)

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ENROLLMENT AND RETENTION: A PRIVATE COLLEGE CONSORTIUM*

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There is widespread agreement that the demographic changes of the next 15 years present a major challenge to the health and vitality of American higher education. No segment or sector will be unaffected. Several sources predict that upwards of 200 institutions may close between 1980 and 1996 (Breneman and Nelson, 1980; Carnegie Council, 1980; Finn, 1978). Private institutions, by agreement, are most likely to be adversely affected by the decline. Rapidly escalating operating costs, accompanied by substantial tuition increases, have made private colleges uncompetitive with the public sector. Despite the recent reports of slight annual enrollment increases nationwide, some colleges have suffered declining enrollments and the tuition losses accompanied by these declines undermine financial stability. Even institutions experiencing stable or increasing enrollments are concerned about their future.

Between 1970 and 1979, 56 private four-year colleges closed; another 24 merged with other private institutions, and six more shifted to public control ("Private College Openings," 1980). In spite of the various state and federal programs that provide some assistance to the nation's independent colleges, the private sector will still confront significant enrollment and financial problems during the next two decades.

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The special history of private colleges is well-known and their place in American higher education is well-established. The research literature suggests that private institutions generally surpass their public sector counterparts with regard to positive impacts on student development, persistance and degree attainment, and student satisfaction with the collegiate experience (e.g., Astin, 1977). Yet paradoxically it is the private sector which is most threatened by the much-discussed "enrollment crisis."

There is really nothing new or unique about the various strategies being developed by colleges across the country to attack the problem of declining enrollments. The list is relatively short and the strategies focus on a fairly limited number of activities. Much of the effort is directed towards admissions and recruiting. Institutions are turning to marketing experts to enhance the image and promote the virtues of "old Acme." Nontraditional students -- defined in the context of institutional traditions as being adults, part-timers, minorities, etc. -- are the targets of intensified recruiting efforts and new academic programs. Yet the focus on recruiting ultimately leads to increased competition for both the declining numbers of traditional students and the new clientele institutions seek to replace them.

While marketing and recruiting are "hot" topics, comparatively little attention is devoted to the issue of retention. Institutional efforts to increase retention are probably among the most cost-effective investments possible for maintaining and enhancing enrollments. Institutions already know a great deal about recruitment and spend lots of dollars each

year on marketing, promotion, special consultants, additional staff, financial aid, etc. Retention programs, traditionally the concern of the student affairs staff, seldom enjoy such high visibility, institutional concern, and special resources.

THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA RETENTION CONSORTIUM

Concern about enrollments has led eight private colleges in Southern California to organize a consortium to develop retention programs. This consortium effort is funded by a grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and uses the technical services of the Higher Education Research Institute in Los Angeles. The eight private colleges in the consortium represent a range of private college interests and perspectives. The consortium colleges are: Azusa Pacific College; Chapman College; Harvey Mudd College; Loyola Marymount University; Mount St. Mary's College; Pitzer College; Scripps College; and Whittier College. This is a diverse group of colleges, each with a unique mission, different enrollment concerns, and special retention problems.

The consortium project is an action project, a direct attempt to improve educational practice and institutional productivity. What distinguishes this effort from the normal institutional concern for retention is the degree of campus commitment to improve retention -- a commitment that involves partnerships between administration, faculty, and student affairs. Each campus has a retention task force, consisting of faculty, administrators, student affairs staff, and students. Additionally, a steering committee with one

representative from each college, generally the Dean of Students, coordinates consortium activities.

Attrition is obviously not a new concern for the consortium institutions. Each has developed special programs -- academic and career counseling, freshman orientation and advising, faculty development, etc. -- which address various aspects of the attrition problem. What makes the consortium effort unique is that it addresses the attrition problem in a systemataic manner and that it involves the cooperative efforts of eight colleges -- institutions committed to assessing the problem, to sharing programs and strategies, and to reducing the drop-out rate.

CONSORTIUM ACTIVITIES

The consortium activities focus on four areas: data collection, organizational development, program development, and networking.

Data Collection

The eight campuses are currently collecting data about the extent of the attrition problem and its causes and consequences. While this may seem an obvious first step, we often forget that "routine" institutional research can be a luxury for a small private college. Only two of these eight college have enjoyed the luxury of a full-time institutional researcher. For the others, institutional research -- particularly research on students -- is one of the range of responsibilities of an overburdened and understaffed Dean's office. A second aspect of the data problem deals with application: if

you can get the data, and once you finally assemble it, what do you do with it? How do you distinguish the meaningful from the meaningless? What do you do with the charts, graphs, and reams of printout?

The consortium institutions are currently collecting data to answer a number of specific questions: What are the financial consequences of attrition -- how much does it cost? What are the characteristics of our drop-outs? Why do they leave and where do they go? Obvious and important questions, yes, but again, for a small private college without an established capacity for institutional research, questions that often go unanswered.

One major source of student data is the ACE/UCLA freshman survey (The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) data). The consortium colleges are reviewing their CIRP freshman profile data, plotting trends and looking for points of leverage: a high percentage of freshman for whom "old Acme" is not the first choice college; a significant percentage of freshman who indicate they will likely transfer or drop-out; student expectations of the need for remedial course work while in college. The CIRP data is an invaluable source for monitoring local changes in the goals, interests, experiences, and expectations of entering students, and can be used for both assessing the past and planning for the future.

In addition to the freshman survey data, the colleges are planning special surveys of current and former students as part of their effort to assess the causes and consequences of attrition. For some of the campuses this will be the first time they have seriously attempted to study attrition

and then to do something about it. Some colleges are also planning to link various data sources to develop "early warning" systems which would identify potential drop-outs and help them with academic and personal problems before they make the ultimate decision to leave college.

One critical aspect about the data collection is that the consortium colleges are not going to spend the next 18 months studying their attrition problems before taking action. The data collection occurs concurrently with other activities and is an on-going process by which the colleges monitor their students and the changing environment of the college.

Organizational Development

The climate of any organization determines the success or failure of any new program. In academic institutions, faculty and academic administrators can make or break any programmatic initiatives. In the case of the consortium institutions, special efforts have been made to mobilize academic and administrative support for this project; the success of the consortium effort depends upon support from all sectors of the campus community. As one dean remarked, "this project is dead on my campus without faculty support."

A data-feedback project such as this one depends upon the willingness of both institutions and individuals to use information as a stimulant for positive change. If the institution -- meaning faculty and administration -- really want to provide a meaningful and productive educational experience for

students, change must occur at the level of both organizations and individuals, in offices and departments as well as among individual adminstrators and faculty. While an environment of openness obviously cannot be created overnight, the administration -- and particularly the president -- must work to promote a positive and nonpunitive view of student retention activities from the very beginning.

The goal of this effort is to develop self-sustaining programs in an environment responsive to and supportive of the data-based retention effort. The consortium is working to develop an organizational program to help faculty and departments learn how to make improvements based on the data about student retention. Included on the agenda are workshops for department chairs, administrators, and faculty. We have already found that faculty and academic administrators will respond to the institutional concern about retention when the issue is reduced from the abstract to the specific. We have seen faculty respond to these concerns when the discussion focuses on the costs and impact of attrition on their campus.

Program Development

As I indicated earlier, the eight consortium institutions already have individual programs that address various aspects of the attrition problem. One goal of the consortium effort is to use the student data to develop a comprehensive and systematic set of interventions to attack the attrition problem, and to fine-tune these interventions once they are operative.

A major thrust of the program development work involves linking national and campus-based research on attrition and using this data to identify areas for programmatic interventions. This has already occured on one campus, where large numbers of students who had not decided on a major and/or career were leaving after their freshman year. A careful assessment of both the campus problem and the research literature led to the development of a special academic advising program for undecided students. The Dean who coordinated this program drew on the skills and interests of both faculty and student affairs staff to plan and implement this program. By all accounts the new advising program has been very successful helping students make decisions about majors. One key component of this program is faculty involvement, faculty contact with undecided students. It may not be "Mark Hopkins and the log," but it is certainly more than many students expect, and unfortunately, receive. The outcome: less students wandering about the campus without academic direction, more student-faculty interaction, and greater student satisfaction.

Networking

We all bemoan the fact that we have precious little contact with our colleagues at other institutions, either across the country or across town. Often when we do meet -- on occasions such as this -- the dicussion turns into a gripe session about personnel problems and budget cuts rather than the good and innovative things happening on individual campuses. One major focus of the consortium activity involves networking among the eight campuses.

The eight liaison personnel are very interested in what is happening on all the consortium campuses. They have developed a good working relationship -- founded on trust and a shared commitment to attacking the attrition problem -- that encourages a free exchange of information and assistance. (I should add that some of these colleges do compete for the same students). The networking activity has taken off quickly in the past two months: let me provide some examples.

At one institution a faculty-administrative committee had been working on retention issues for over a year: a short case study of the committee's experience, effectiveness, and errors has helped many of the other campus committees get organized and chart a path for their future work wary of the problems and mindful of the successes experienced at the first college. This same campus has developed a set of interview schedules for assessing freshman experiences and satisfaction which several other colleges plan to review and adapt to local needs.

Another college has developed a flow chart to reduce much of the uncertainty involved in enrollment planning. The Dean, in consultation with the registrar, is able to predict accurately the number of drop outs and transfers each year, thus facilitating enrollment planning. This flow chart also helps to identify potential drop-outs so they can be watched -- and when appropriate counseled -- before they make the traumatic decision to drop out. At last count, six of the seven consortium institutions wanted to adapt this chart for their own use.

The previously mentioned advising program for undecided students has also sparked interest. Copies of the faculty advising manual for that program are now floating around other campuses and it seems likely that faculty from some institutions will contact their counterparts at this institution to learn more about the program.

In short, the consortium provides a structure for contact and cross-fertilization across the eight campuses, not only for the Deans of Students but for faculty and academic administrators as well.

SUMMARY

This consortium project is a concerted effort to affect one of the few enrollment variables that colleges and universities can control. Institutions cannot do much about the birthrate, financial aid policies, the job market for college graduates, or any one of the dozens of other factors that affect college enrollments. Colleges and universities can do something about attrition; they can improve the rate of retention. This project is less than two months old -- the kick-off workshop was held only two weeks ago. But already we have seen results: Faculty interest, presidential support, administrative concern, and information flow across eight campuses.

We believe that the consortium effort will actually reduce attrition at these eight institutions. Additionally, we believe it will demonstrate what strategies can be effective in improving retention so that these programs can be exported to other campuses experiencing similar enrollment concerns and attrition problems.

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